

## Ba Sing Strange by ItWasANecessaryTragedy

**Category:** Avatar: The Last Airbender, Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Action/Adventure, Alternate Universe, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Angry Zuko (Avatar), Angst, Background Party (Stranger Things), Badass Zuko (Avatar), Blue Spirit Zuko (Avatar), Book 2: Earth (Avatar), Crack Treated Seriously, Crossover, El thinks Zuko is her brother, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Found Family, Friendship, Gen, Humour, Hurt/Comfort, If you can't find what you want make it yourself, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Mental Health Issues, My First Work in This Fandom, POV Third Person, POV Zuko (Avatar), Post-Stranger Things 3, Robin Buckley & Steve Harrington Friendship, Steve Harrington Needs a Hug, Steve Harrington is Lonely, The Pool is a literal gateway, This is the definition of, WIP, Zuko (Avatar)-centric, badass Steve Harrington, give Steve parents 2021, he is scared of little sisters, little does she know, zuko can manipulate lightning now, zuko thinks demogorgons are spirits

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**Summary:**

What if Zuko found a way into the Upside Down?

What if he found his way into a certain somebody's pool?

What if not only does he have to worry about a war he's no longer sure he's on the right side of but also horrific supernatural creatures and laboratory scientists and annoying children who keep stealing his dual dao AND a guy with a spiked bat and great hair that all want a piece of him?

Is this what it's like to have... friends?

◦

Other Gaang members may turn up, I'm not sure yet. I'm also keeping this gen as I am terrible at writing romance. Set during Zuko's holiday in Ba Sing Se.

## 1. frying some brains

### Author's Note:

This is a WIP, be warned. I vowed never to post a WIP, but I figured I need the motivation. It's lockdown, what else is there to do?

The Blue Spirit trod one foot in front of the other along the winding ridges of the rooftops, each clay stone tile a stepping stone across the burning embers of life in Ba Sing Se, slumbering below. The Spirit saw his hapless victim, an earthbender of some skill standing on the street cobbles in the pre-dawn light below. He saw the man's bald spot shine yellow in the light. The Spirit slid his dual dao out of their holster on his back, and the metal shredded a faint ringing into the air. There was no other sound. The Blue Spirit knew how to be silent.

*Habit of necessity.*

The Spirit tilted onto his tiptoes and crouched near the gutter of the shop roof, sparing one last glance at the man. The man was picking his nose.

*Best to die doing what he loves most.*

The Spirit imagined the way the skin of his throat would part like parchment, the way his eyes would bug. Maybe he would clutch at the wound and wonder what he'd done to deserve this, before a gust of wind would shuffle his thinning hair for the last time as he'd watch the Blue Spirit in his blue mask and tight black clothes take his money pouch and hop away.

*Everything. Nothing.*

The Spirit leaped, blade aiming true for just a glance of metal against skin. There was a split second of indecision, and suddenly he'd pulled his blade back and the Spirit landed with his dao pointed right at the earthbender's no-longer-bored gaze.

*Shit.*

The man let out an incoherent yell of surprise, his voice amusingly much higher than it had been earlier that day, and suddenly the Spirit was compromised. He dodged the man's clumsy attempt to entrap his feet in the earth and thought about running. But the Blue Spirit never ran. Not before he got what he came for.

‘Quick! A vagabond!’

*Ugh.*

His voice was just as nasally as he remembered.

Problem was, this man was Dai Li. Any moment now, others would come as back-up, and he'd be encased in rock. Thinking fast, the Spirit jumped back onto the roof, spiralling behind the man's head before he could react. He leapt again, this time handles-first, and the man only had time to let out one short cry of indignation before lights out, and he crumpled to the ground like a withered root.

The Spirit waited for a twitch or a wince, and when none came, let out a silent sigh. He could hear shouts from farther off, and he knew he needed to leave, fast.

Heart hammering, he knelt down on the cobbles and undid the leather knot holding the money pouch to the man's belt. It was very heavy.

*There's enough to feed Uncle and I for months with this!*

He stood. He took his blade and placed the flat on the man's slack cheek. It gleamed dully as the dawn seemed reluctant to invade on the moment.

The man was a bully. The man deserved to die for making Uncle dance to avoid his swords. For giving them just the one gold piece from his silk pockets afterwards. For putting that horrible desperate gleam into Uncle's eye.

He'd felt so small. No. Zuko had. Zuko was. The Blue Spirit had never been made large or small by anyone. And yet, like Zuko, the Blue Spirit could not kill. He bit his lip on a growl of frustration.

*Weak.*

It mattered little. The Blue Spirit would do as he wished. Freedom sung in the vibration of his blades. He sliced them away into their sheath once again. The slamming of feet echoed along the clay buildings and he snapped his head up.

‘Thief!’

‘Murderer!’

‘Get into formation!’

With a gasp, the Spirit saw about eight Dai Li Agents racing down the street towards him. The earth beneath him struck upwards and only by pure instinct did he pull away, stumbling as his foot was caught. He pulled free with no little amount of effort, and almost pitched over. Everything was still for one terrifying slice of slow motion time and then he was sprinting soundlessly, off like a ghost. Like a spirit.

Unfortunately, the sun was finally peeking brightly into the day, and silence was not enough to hide him.

He was fast, and he knew the earthbenders were struggling to keep up. Each stride felt like he was leaping meadows. Earth erupted beneath his steps, and he was dodging rocks like bullets.

Maybe if he could just get far enough ahead that they couldn't see him turn, he could take a running jump onto a roof and climb his way up the buildings to the Middle Ring. He'd be home safe then.

*Home. Hah.*

Suddenly a rock came at him too fast; it was sharp and small and hit him right in the shoulder, stabbing deep. The pain was swift and jarring, but he didn't react.

Instead, he swung himself into a small side alley of a house, but didn't stop to wait for them to catch up and find him, instead shimmying up a gutter pipe and behind a chimney, ignoring the growing agony in his shoulder. It felt like a ball of lightning circling in the wound, though he knew it was just earth.

The roof he was crouched on was made of sandstone and paved with

clay tiles. He squatted on the flat part by the chimney just before it sloped down to the street. In front of him was a wall with, thankfully, no windows.

He needed to make his way up to the top somehow, already mapping out a route with the lines between the bricks. His stab wound was tender, and dripping blood like a tap. There was no way he was hiding this from Uncle Iroh. It stopped him from rotating his shoulder all the way round, but as long as he was quick, he could still climb up to the middle ring.

The Dai Li rushed by in a clamour of armour and trash talk.

His muscles burned satisfyingly, and he flexed his fingers. Time to climb.

As he reached his fingertips forward, he saw the surface shimmer and something inside him flopped in a premonition of dread. Then, his fingertips went through the brick.

*Like a spirit mirage.*

He held back a yelp, and snatched his hand back as if he'd stuck it in open flame and not something unbearably cold.

He didn't know how this was possible. He sat in dumbfounded horror for a moment, before poking the brick again. It felt like a sponge giving way before his finger passed through, though there was no visible change. He felt nothing on the other side except coldness.

His ribs trembled and his toes scrunched themselves hard on the roof as if defying some force in order to keep him rooted. He needed to leave. It was URGENT, but he couldn't think past what he'd just discovered.

He could hear the Dai Li murmuring in confusion on the street further down, perplexed by his disappearing act. As far as they were aware, he'd just turned the corner and vanished.

'Let's check the side alleys even if they don't go anywhere. Little vermin like him always pull tricks like that.'

The Spirit saw them split and a group came back up the street towards him. His throat thrummed with his heartbeat and the taste of blood. His shoulder pulsed in the same unsteady way with a static-energy pain and he felt his head fill with it.

Three earthbenders turned into his alley, and so the Blue Spirit took the choice, because the Spirit always had a choice, and he passed through the mirage. Just before he'd slipped fully through, he locked eyes with one of them, who gaped as the wall swallowed him up.

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'Wow, no sign of them anywhere. Maybe it really was a spirit!'

'Stop talking nonsense, Remi. I got them in the shoulder, I know it. I felt it.'

'But how was it so silent and fast? And where did it go?'

'Stop calling it an it! Argh, I mean-'

'...we should leave. I have a bad feeling Remi's right.'

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The Blue Spirit reeled into an unexpected dimness. It looked like he was inside the building he had just been on top of, but something was *off*. The room had a central spiral stairway, a bed, a bookshelf and a light that didn't seem to work.

But it was more than that; it was as if a dark filter had been placed in front of his eyes. His chi felt scrambled, like something huge was *missing*.

Not to mention, there was the sudden quiet and the unnatural dust swirling where he'd disturbed it. It looked like pollen or spores and just watching it churn gave him the urge to cough.

Even if this was the spirit world, he had no doubt those Earthbenders would be not far behind him. How could he have let himself be seen?

He groaned and resisted the impulse to remove his mask and rub his eyes.

Then he crept quickly down the steps, keeping his breathing steady. The whole house seemed to be abandoned but he wasn't going to risk being called out for trespassing. Although there was a twisty gut feeling that it wasn't an Earth Kingdom citizen that he was afraid to discover.

The bottom of the staircase opened into a kitchen. It was mostly just utter decay. The wooden door to the outside had rotted and what the Blue Spirit could only assume used to be a sink was filled with black sludge. The floorboards were falling away into the foundations so that there was barely even a safe way to the exit.

It truly did seem utterly abandoned, like no one had even stepped foot here for a hundred years. His heart jolted; was this what had happened to the Avatar? Was he about to discover a world in the future, destroyed by the war? A surprising pang of guilt tugged at his stomach and the uneasiness he'd felt since he'd crossed the mirage rose like bile.

He couldn't help but think, *I'd rather be brainwashed by the Dai Li.*

He scrambled back up the spiral stairway, his breath stuttering. He reached the top and ran, relieved, straight into the wall. Literally.

He bounced off it, and a part of the wallpaper crumbled, revealing a horrifying mould underneath.

"No!"



Dust and other unidentifiable pollutants clouded upwards from his impact with the wall and floor. He jumped straight back up, his forehead throbbing only slightly. He ran a hand along the wallpaper, nudging for a spongy feeling. There was nothing. It felt as solid as his dao.

The smell of mildew was suddenly overpowering and nauseating and his hands shook.

"No."

He slid to his knees, his bones jelly. As he did so, something hard clinked inside his boot.

Breathlessly he removed his dagger and held it in his palm like an offering to something that wasn't listening. It glinted softly as he pulled it out of its sheath.

The first time he'd ever unsheathed it, he'd expected it to be bloodstained and rusted, a war hero in a piece of metal. His uncle had sent it to him from the walls of Ba Sing Se, just before Lu Ten-well. He hadn't known Uncle so well back then. It had made sense to him that his Uncle would gift him a true weapon of war as a way of saying *this is what you shall do, be, become* .

He'd been almost *disappointed* to discover the dagger unused, sharp as Azula's smiles. Well, as disappointed as a ten year old boy can be, owning his first dagger.

Azula had been disappointed with her doll; he still remembered the heat against his face as she'd set it alight.

At some point, he'd realised that it was his dagger, his alone. He would choose what blood it would shed. It delighted him as much as it scared him.

So far, no blood.

But it had cut off his phoenix plume, his top knot of hair, which some might argue was more dangerous than anything else it could ever do for him. Treason, after all, being deadly.

He twisted it in his hands, turning it over carefully, and read the inscription for the thousandth time in his long short life.

*Never give up without a fight .*

Uncle wasn't Uncle without a proverb or a piece of sage wisdom thrown in, after all. He knew Uncle better now. The Blue Spirit stood and returned down the stairs, careful not to make a sound.

Time to find out what this world was.

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There was *nothing* . No water, no food, no *life* . Most importantly, no sun! The perpetual night made his chi feel frozen like the Avatar in

ice and time. The sun's absence shortened his breaths, a cavern eked out in his flesh right where his lungs should be. There weren't even any stars to light his way.

Every building was derelict, left to rot. And what was *weird* was it was all a parallel of the normal world; the structures were the same, if moulded, the landmarks all identical. He didn't like to think about what that meant.

The ground was made out of a dark damp soil and smelt wretched. Zuko coughed and it was the only sound for miles. Zuko dug his fingers into the soil, wondering if anything lived beneath. His shoulder stung, and blood trickling down him looked like a fork of lightning.

After half a day (a guess) of walking aimlessly through the dilapidated Ba Sing Se, he decided to just return to the place he'd arrived; there was a good chance the Mirage would open again and he wasn't going to waste time wandering around when his escape was so obvious. If he couldn't find someone or something who would be 'willing' to help, then that was his best bet. He did feel annoyed though that after all his efforts, he was back where he'd started, almost literally, having gained nothing of value during his trip through this dark world.

He'd long since taken off his mask, hanging it on his dao, and held a flame in his hands to light the way. It didn't do it very well, but he felt like there were some things crawling right on the edges of the blackness, scampering away from the flickers of flame, but following nonetheless. To be completely honest, he was getting paranoid. He thought he could hear scuttling or whispers and every so often there was the smell of sulfur permeating the air like foul breath.

Then, just as he was passing through the street that he was previously chased down, something *screeched* . It cracked the world into before and after like a lightning strike. The sound sizzled down the collapsed structures, jumped erratically from one to the other and approached blindingly fast. Fear shot down his spine and he launched his depleted fire in the direction of the sound and what it lit up was *horrific* .

It was tall, running with four long limbs and a zebra-horse-shaped featureless face. Each limb ended in wolf-bear claws digging dark rips in the ground as it moved forward. Then at his fire, it reared back, and its head *opened* . Like a flower. Revealing nine rows of the sharpest teeth surrounding a hole into its narrow winding neck. It shrieked, and the ground trembled.

It lunged towards him, swiping a spidery leg to gouge out his gut. The claw brushed his clothing, neatly slicing it across his bellybutton, but didn't break skin, by virtue of Zuko's quick impulse learned by years of training to move back. However, as Zuko moved back, he tripped, finding himself sprawled on the ground as the creature *leaped* , like a leopard-cheetah, its claws aimed to stab, its teeth aimed for his head.

Zuko didn't think, but reacted, letting out the biggest stream of fire that he had since he was thirteen and unafraid. His shoulder throbbed in agony at the abrupt movement, and the sheath of his dao dug into his back.

As Zuko's fire blast engulfed it, it screeched again, staggering and collapsing. Its head, if one could call it that, burned noisily, popping and snapping.

Soon, it lay still, its body shoved away by the blast, but only by inches. Zuko took in ragged breaths, alarmed by his own brutality. He waited for any sound, afraid to move, though he knew he couldn't stay lying down forever. It seemed...dead? He hadn't expected to kill it so easily.

Another thought occurred that made his blood run cold. Maybe there had never been fire in this place before. Maybe this creature had never experienced it before and that was why it seemed to be so grievously injured.

Maybe this Otherworld was *always* dark, *always* cold. Maybe Agni had abandoned this place.

The thought was so spooky that Zuko immediately got to his feet, itching to run and never stop. He needed to get out. He missed Uncle Iroh like a warm drink; Iroh would know what to do.

With a sudden sneaking suspicion, he lit his hand again. He could see more of them, vaguely lit shapes in the void from the light of his hand and the burning body. They didn't come near, still as one like a hive of wasps. His heart started beating so fast that he thought it would rupture.

He started backing away towards a building where he could hide. The open doorway grinned like a treasure.

*Get inside, and I'll have a chance.*

In a flash, a bigger creature that stood on only two legs leapt towards him. He threw the hottest fire he could manage at it, but the creature seemed more resilient than the small four-legged one, although it still wailed in pain.

It knocked into him and winded him. Oddly all of a sudden, the world around him became a blur of colours, as he tried to breathe and couldn't. He felt reality ripping like feathers and then blades whipping past his skin. The creature had him in its jaws or maybe its petals and he couldn't feel anything but then-

There was light. Was he dying?

No. There were *stars* .

Instantly he found his breath. The creature had a claw embedded in his right thigh, and Zuko was pelting flame after flame at it as it kept attempting to lunge for a bite, but he couldn't get the right angle to push it off of him. Zuko did then what he'd only ever seen done once by his uncle, although that had been for demonstration purposes and not in a fight. Quickly he placed his hands on either side of its sulfurous head and *spun fire* , creating a ball of pure heat and flames.

It screamed almost like a human, but Zuko moved to grip its head in his inferno, feeling fully for the first time the slime and biological gunk of it. He was boiling its *brains* . Presuming it had any.

They played tug of war with the creature's head before it finally managed to leap away from Zuko, bits of its rotten flesh catching in his fingernails. It went backwards into what looked like a bulging distortion in the air, like heat waves, an apparent blister on the skin of reality.

There was one last ghastly howl, and then nothing, as the air flattened out.

He fell straight backwards into water. It was cold water that burned his eyes, and he was forced to suppress a gasp of shock.

He was used to the random misfortunes the universe pushed onto him however, and also used to swimming in high sea waves wearing full armour.

Going down deep enough, there was hard ground which he could push against, breaking the surface, eyes stinging. Rain pelted down and he could see he was in some kind of spirit pool. It was lit an unnatural blue somehow, glowing in the semi-darkness.

He opened his mouth automatically for the rain, greedy for the water in a way he'd only felt once, as he was drifting in the ocean with Uncle for so long without water after the disaster at the North Pole.

Gathering his senses and ignoring the rippling pain in his shoulder, he pulled himself out and onto the side, panting, his dao still surprisingly digging into his shoulder blades. The side was made of tiling similar to the Air Temples.

Zuko frowned.

The water in the spirit pool tasted wrong, and smelled like something dreadful, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Did that creature *create* that Mirage and take him here? He thought about the smaller creature and worried at his lip. Had he killed a Spirit? Is that even possible?

*Blasphemy .*

As if he, unfavoured heir and the weakest bender in the Royal Family

could kill a Spirit! What a thought. Maybe a Spirit had seen his plight and taken pity on him to bring him back. He made a short apology to any offended Spirits and lit his shaking hands to examine his surroundings better.

He was in between a huge empty strange looking building and a vast forest of pitch black. He saw no more of those creatures, although he knew how good they were at hiding.

The stab wound in his shoulder seemed survivable as long as he got to a Healer and soon. When he attempted to stand, white hot agony rang up his leg; he collapsed with a grunt. His thigh was badly injured by the creature's claw. It seemed deep but, he decided optimistically, he hadn't bled out yet!

He blinked away exhaustion and rainwater and the burning spirit water and tried to think.

*There is always a way, Zuko.*

He felt for the mask hung on his dao with his good arm and almost jumped in surprise when it brushed his fingertips. He tugged it over the handles and put it on reverently.

Now the Blue Spirit was in charge. Pain for a spirit is irrelevant. He stood.

*This isn't Ba Sing Se.*

But how could he have arrived anywhere else? And more



importantly, where was he now?

He hoped anyone he met were friendly because he couldn't fight very well like this. His right leg felt like it was on fire. He hissed as he took a step forward.

*I need to be quiet.*

The wind blew goosebumps over his wet naked neck.

It smelt like *bandages*.

He gasped as he realised.

The Blue Spirit couldn't help but rear back with the sense memory. Reaching up with a cold hand to his face, he was almost shocked when his fingers met wood instead of charred skin.

He slipped into a silent crouch at the edge of the water, taking deep breaths of the scent.

*Calm, Blue Spirit.*

Slowly, he looked up. The building beyond looked like nothing he'd ever seen before, with materials he couldn't name.

He moved hesitantly round the Spirit Pool with its bright blue glow, listening to the crickethoppers charousing from the grass.

Even the air round here moved differently, heavier. The breeze brought with it the smell of burning chemicals. He knew there must

be a factory nearby, and probably a Fire Nation one. The air smelt unclean.

The Spirit examined the wall for holds, feeling excitement brewing in his stomach. He spotted a window or some kind of door up high, made out of a transparent material he couldn't name but knew he'd seen before. It seemed however that there was an opening for the Spirit to make his way inside.

He probably shouldn't.

Almost definitely shouldn't.

But this wasn't Ba Sing Se. He needed to find out where he was, and he needed medicine, fast. No matter what element these people heralded, the likelihood they would help him, as either the Blue Spirit of Nowhere, as Li, the homeless scarred boy with Fire Nation skin or as Zuko, banished prince of the goddamn Fire Nation, was slim.

*Besides, stealing is second nature to me now.*

Decisively he moved round the building, walking slowly. He reached the other side of the building, where to his surprise, there was a door. The stars watched on, peeking through the rainclouds, amused.

He couldn't begin to describe the metal contraptions here; they looked like tanks or carriages of some kind, but he had no idea how they would move, as they had no chimney for firebending. Here, he could see an odd road with a small group of similar buildings and vehicles, but no one was around. Even at night in Ba Sing Se there were always some people, writing or humming or squabbling or begging.

The Spirit tried the handle of the door but it seemed to be locked. Pushing and pulling and even heating the lock did nothing, and he decided not to approach the vehicles for fear of something exploding.

The wind picked up. He shivered, and turned back. He didn't dare to light a flame, so he stumbled back in near darkness until the glowing water appeared. The window-door was still open so he stood beneath and planned his route, wondering if he could make it up there with his leg.

He could be quiet enough, at least to find medicine and explore, and if not, he had his swords.

Secretly he wanted to find someone who would help him and explain everything. He had a bad feeling, but at least he could sense Agni. At least he wasn't in that dark place all alone any longer. He didn't quite understand how he'd gotten here, but he'd take it as a blessing.

Then by the edge of the glowing water, a silhouette caught his eye. Was that something at the fringe of the treeline? He froze, waiting for movement for a second or so, silent as sunlight. Nothing moved so he let out a breath. Then, as he turned slowly around and placed his hand on the wall, he heard a shout behind him.

*Fuck.*

He spun around to see a man brandishing a huge bat running towards

him. The man was tall and gangly, with big brown eyes that bugged out and pretty great-looking brown hair. The lanky man gasped on seeing the Spirit mask, and swung.

*You've really messed up this time.*

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Sorry about the lack of Stranger Things kids in this chapter but they're coming. ;)

## 2. when in doubt, climb a tree

The Spirit ducked, and the bat whistled above his head, sharp nails sticking out just barely brushing through his hair. He didn't waste a second and jumped up onto the wall and began to climb. In retrospect he probably should have ran away into the woods but the man and his scary bat were in the way. This man was not going to help him.

"Who the fuck are you? Get out of my yard!"

*That's an accent I've never heard before .*

He was nearly up out of the man's reach but then the bat swiped his injured leg sideways and he lost his balance on the wall. Ankle throbbing, the Spirit did the only thing he could think of, landing back down on the ground in a semi-graceful crouch, still breathing steadily.

*The Blue Spirit doesn't firebend. Hold your chi.*

The Blue Spirit then yanked the dual dao out of their sheath and turned, blocking the bat's next swipe by capturing it between his blades. For a moment, the Spirit and the man locked eyes. The man looked shocked, angry, maybe even afraid.

"Who are you?"

The Spirit didn't speak. Instead he took the moment of shock to use the wall as a jumping pad, gaining height quickly and then leaping over the man's head. The bat man barely had time to look up before he'd whacked him in the head *hard* with the blunt of his blades. The man grunted but didn't topple as the Spirit landed.

Surprised, the Spirit had no choice but to sweep his legs out from under him. The man went right over, landing with an *oof!* , vaguely reminding him of the Water Tribe boy with his naïve bravery, despite an obvious lack of fighting experience. The Spirit immediately pinned him to the ground, trying to think of his next move. Although this man had withstood the blow of his dual dao...

"Fuck. Fuck. Get off!"

As the man bucked, the Spirit crossed the blades over his neck, and he stilled.

"Shit." The man's large eyes looked at the Spirit warily, seeming to examine the mask for cracks.

There was silence for a moment. He really should knock the guy out, but it felt wrong whilst he was helplessly restrained like this. His thigh was also burning with the effort to restrain him, and he could feel fresh blood running from it. He felt dizzy.

"Are you a Russian? Is that why you're here?"

Confusion was hard to show with a mask on and unwilling to speak.

"... what do you want?" The man was wriggling beneath him, breathing hard, but he seemed calmer. Maybe if he flashed a wound, the man would understand, but he was having a hard time thinking coherently.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, the bat slammed into his ribcage and he fell onto his wrist with a grunt. His shoulder tore open again and the man scrambled away, bat in hand. He could barely breathe.

He heard his blood gurgling in his ears for a few seconds, the world tipping. The man was shouting something, but couldn't focus on the words. Was that another voice? Was there someone else here?

His vision was darkening round the edges just a bit, but he wouldn't be him if he didn't fight for every scrap of life he could get. Staggering to his feet, he saw the man with his bat already poised to swing and a small cubic object at his feet making a funny rushing noise. "Don't move! There are other. . . people on the way."

He whipped his Dao into a defensive position and waited for a strike.

Instead of lifting his bat, the man's eyes flicked to the obvious bleeding in his thigh, eyelids fluttering in surprise. "You're hurt."

This man seemed unstable; he was unpredictable at the very least. The man moved forward, and in retaliation, the Spirit scraped his blades together with a harsh screech, jabbing them forward, and he stumbled back again.

The man's briefly open face shuttered closed and he thinned his lips.  
"Do you speak?"

Without answering, the Blue Spirit leapt straight over the Spirit Pool, landing catlike on the other side, eyes set on the dark forest. The man gasped again and seemed to think better of following him over, instead running round the pool.

"Stop! Don't go in there!"

He didn't spare the man a glance before slipping deep into the shadows. Quick footsteps followed behind him, but the Blue Spirit was no amateur at evasion.

He hoiked himself up a tree, like a wisp of smoke, curling himself against its trunk. Stabbing a blade into the tree helped him get even higher, and he saw the man pinwheel at the base, obviously befuddled.

There was a moment where the Spirit sat and seethed through the agony in his thigh and the man looked into the darkness confused. He eventually turned back, his fists clenched and his face pale and grim.

What had he been thinking? Complete idiocy! Father would order him executed if he saw how poorly planned this was. He should have waited till light, and used his Li persona; it worked well enough in Ba Sing Se. Technically he still could; thank Agni he'd been wearing the mask.

He took it off now, hanging it back off his dao, enjoying the cool breeze on his sweaty face. It smelt like rain, earthy and fresh, although he still couldn't forget the chemical smell from earlier.



But what was he going to do if the creature turned up again before that? There was no way he'd win another fight with any one of those creatures in this condition. Maybe he'd just stay quiet for now and wait for the light.

He felt so angry with everything that his head actually ached from clenching his jaw. It was times like this that the world would look so much more beautiful burning.

Instead Zuko listened to the forest and breathed. Sometimes when he was younger and still at the palace, he would sneak out with his Blue Spirit mask at night and explore around the palace land just out of Caldera's main settlement. It was mostly fields of crops and volcanic pathways, but right at the bottom of Mount Jishāo, about three miles from the palace, there was the Forest of the Kemurikage.

It was basically completely unexplored for fear of the spirits that made it their home, except for the Blue Spirit. He'd spent hours upon hours there, meditating, practicing katas, finding hidden gems like the possotters inhabiting the river running through.

Sometimes he'd sat in the trees like this, listening. But he always had to make it back before dawn. He'd only made that mistake once, getting caught returning in the light, late for his morning training, so the whole palace was looking for him in a panic.

He spent four days after that locked in his room without food or company; even the servants bringing water hadn't been allowed to talk to him. He'd been eight then and his mother had been upset, but as helpless as he.

*No one can protect me except the one person who refuses to.*

Well, that was harsh. His father just protected him in different ways.

He'd been afraid that Zuko could have been kidnapped by the Kemurikage spirits, and it had been Zuko's ignorance and arrogance that had warranted the punishment. The punishment hadn't stopped him from leaving every other night anyway, but it had taught him something.

For every reward there was a risk. It was acknowledging and understanding the true risk that you could take it and come out the other side. He was never late again.

And look at him now. Lost, injured, with no idea how to get back, having taken a risk that he didn't understand.

*Great.*

His hand lit up with fire, but he didn't throw it. He settled with letting it lick at his hand in sync with his rage until he breathed himself calm again.

Here seemed like a good hiding spot, safe. There was a lot of rustling from wildlife and a swarm of bugs kept trying to land on him, but for now, it was fine. He saw what looked like a deerpony but *different*. It sauntered past sniffing at some moss, before looking up at the tree. He locked eyes with its murky ones, spooked. If he didn't know any better, he'd say it was just a deer.

*But there's no such thing.*

It was only after it bolted away, that he realised he didn't know any better. He shivered.

He'd been there for maybe thirty minutes when he heard voices. It sounded like children, so he was confused. They were coming from the direction of the house though, and when he heard the man from earlier, he sat bolt upright, from where he'd just been swinging his legs.

"He went this way. He was injured, he can't have made it far."

"I don't understand! El says there were never any boys at the lab." This voice sounded female, young and unnerved.

*They're looking for me? Why?*

"Then he's not from the lab. Whoever this swords guy is though, he sounds freaky." This was a slightly lower feminine voice, mildly sarcastic, which reminded him of Mai. Everything reminded him of her.

*Oh, to have a ninja star randomly chucked at me right now...*

They'd already be back in Ba Sing Se if she was with him.

"He's about three or four years younger than me, dark hair... looks pretty athletic and can jump pretty high, bet he'd have beaten Billy

up on the basketball court." That was the man with the bat.

"Wow!" exclaimed the young girl's voice.

"Steve, please don't ruin this night-time jaunt into the creepy demogorgon woods after a sword-wielding maniac with sports, right now. I couldn't take it."

*They're dao blades!*

This boy sounded like he had a lisp, but it was hard to tell when he couldn't hear them properly. They were slowly coming closer though, and Zuko shifted on the branch, debating whether to jump down and make a run for it or to stay hidden.

A small part of him whispered *maybe you should try and talk to them*. He slipped his mask back on, his shoulder stinging with the movement.

"Shut your mouth, Dustin, or you're getting no arcade money from me ever again." So his name was Steve. What an odd name. What was arcade?

"Hey, hey, hey, no need to be hasty!" cried the boy called Dustin.

Agni above, his shoulder was swelling. It must still have earth in it. What if it got infected? He *needed* help.

"Keep your voices down!" The woman with the sultry voice hissed.

"We probably should have waited for Nancy and Jonathon."

"And probably Will, Mike and Lucas. But they don't need to be here. Once we've found the guy, they can help out. And anyway, I'm Steve's favourite, it only makes sense I get special privileges."

"Ugh, gross! Mud in my shoe..." Steve grumbled. "How is tromping through a dark forest after danger a special privilege?"

"I have a feeling." Another young voice cut in, stilted and fumbling. "When I focussed I saw him in the trees, not too far in. He seemed... angry."

"Sounds about right." said Steve cheerfully.

Zuko sat frozen in shock. How could she know that? Was she a soothsayer? A chill settled in his bones, and he tightened his grip on the branch, knuckles like white stones under his skin.

As they moved past his tree, he could see them all. They were carrying bright objects that struck shadows into oblivion, brighter than any lantern or torch that he had seen before.

There were five people, including a young girl with hair the colour of the setting sun. It was impossible, and had to be the moonlight and her lantern light casting an unnatural filter. Or maybe she was spirit-touched...

"Here! Somewhere nearby." A small pale girl announced. Come to think of it, they were all odd-looking. They were almost like paintings of air nomads, but different still, with unusual features.

A disturbing thought hit him for a moment, but he couldn't let it bother him. If he was dead, why would he still be bleeding? His mind was all he had, wouldn't do to start losing it.

The pale girl seemed to know he was here. The orange-hair and Steve both looked at her like they really trusted what she was saying.

"Don't you think..." Dustin was flicking his light around jerkily, peering into the forest intensely.

"Stop that." The woman snapped, gripping his wrist.

"... something feels Upside-Downy." the boy whispered.

As he said that, there was a screech and a dark flash towards the group, and the Spirit immediately recognised it as the creature he fought before. It ran unevenly but fast, like a spider-moth missing a leg.

Before the Spirit could react, with a cry that rent the air in two, it launched itself towards the vulnerable group on the forest ground.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Here's a second chapter, didn't think I'd get it out so

fast! Thanks for reading my nonsensical brainfart  
guys.

### 3. nerves are made of lightning

Steve yelled and swung his bat, but before the two forces collided, the Spirit pushed forward, dao in hand, hands scraping against the bark as he dropped down. His stomach rose to his throat as the air whipped past and he positioned his dao, determined not to pig-chicken out.

He landed on top of the creature's disgusting back as he forced both his swords either side of its spine. It was like pushing your arms into a bramble bush.

The creature squealed like a blade being sharpened against a whetstone. Steve's bat hit the creature in the side with way more force than the Spirit had bargained for, and the creature bucked as the Spirit was launched sideways.

He flung off, nails scrabbling at air and slammed into the trunk of a tree, back first. For a moment he couldn't breathe, let alone move from his crumpled position at the bottom of the tree.

Unfortunately the stabbing seemed to do nothing but enrage it, and it swivelled its charred eyeless head towards the Spirit and *recognised him* .

It screeched again, and the Spirit felt like his head was going to split open. He had killed the last one with fire, but the Spirit wasn't a firebender. He also knew what exposing himself as a firebender could do to his only hope of getting help.



Steve hit it again, cursing, but it only distracted it from the Spirit for a few seconds, as it took a swipe at Steve's head, throwing him to the ground. The woman screamed.

‘Steve!’

It then advanced towards the Spirit, and he lifted himself into his elbows, pain ricocheting along his spine. Why him? The goddamn universe.

This one was bigger as well, cleverer too and it hadn't succumbed to fire before. Just as the Spirit was struggling to get to his feet, wheezing, sure that he was going to die, trying to make a split decision whether to bend, the creature froze. Then it lifted up into the air. Gaping, the Spirit watched in horror and awe as it writhed helpless.

The pale girl was standing straight, centred balance and control with her hands out in front of her, and somehow he could swear in the bright moonlight, her hands were contorting the creature's limbs. A trickle of lurid blood came out of her nose.

*It's not possible. Bloodbenders are supposed to be a myth! There's no way.*

The creature's limb snapped and it squealed, swiping at air. His dao glinted out of its bony black and purple back.

Then the girl staggered. Dustin gripped her shoulder to steady her,

but it was obvious she could not do it for long. The woman gave the Spirit a glance of pure terror, as if she thought he was their last hope.

*We're doomed.*

None of the others were benders apparently, or had brought any weapons, and the Spirit could barely stand, clutching the tree trunk.

But.

He could feel the lights. His chi was drawn to it, fizzing and twisting. Somehow, (and it should be impossible, just like blood bending) they had bottled lightning.

*If I don't do this, we'll all die anyway.*

He didn't have the control to *create* lightning, but he knew *theoretically* how to redirect it. Maybe...

With great concentration, and the steadiest breathing he'd ever had, he pulled the lightning towards him. It sparked and buzzed as it came to him like a spinning dragon in the darkness and he felt it like a tremor up his body. Dustin yelled in fear and the woman pushed him and the orange-hair behind her, all of them staring at the burning energy. He must look eerie, like this, with his grinning mask, manipulating light. It took all of his concentration and control not to just topple over and strike himself.

For a moment, he thought he might, and they were all going to watch immolate himself, and then they would die.

*Feel the chi move, into the stomach, and out of the fingertips.*

*Into the stomach.*

*Feel it!*

He aimed, and he fired.

The creature spasmed briefly, casting flickering light over the trees, and then there was darkness. The lights were gone, only the faint gleam of the moonlight to show the creature's limp body. The girl dropped.

‘El!’ The spirit-touched girl ran to her friend, while the woman strode forward towards the creature. The Spirit leant against the trunk again, adrenaline making his body sag and his hands shake. He stared at its body in shock.

‘Robin, don’t!’ Steve shouted from the floor, and the Spirit could hear from the wincing rawness of his voice that he was injured.

The woman, who must have been Robin, nudged the creature with her foot as it smoked, before spinning round. ‘Yeah. It’s dead.’ She then looked at the Spirit, her head tilting.

'How did you do that?' She didn't sound unkind, but she didn't sound exactly grateful either.

'Robin...'

'Robin, we need to get Steve and El inside!' Dustin was panicking, hand clutching at his also odd-coloured hair, which was the light colour of freshly cut wood.

'I'm fine, it's just another head injury for me. ' A trickle of blood ran down his forehead from a sizeable lump as he said it. Steve looked anxiously at the bloodbender, who was sitting up now, wiping at her nose.

'I'm okay.' El stared at the Spirit. In fact, they were all staring.

Should he take the mask off? Should he speak? His thigh stung. He felt like he was dreaming.

The spirit-touched girl pulled El up and put an arm over her shoulder, and Dustin went to Steve, fussing worriedly.

'I don't get it. Are none of you freaked out?' Robin stepped between him and the others, wary.

'It's crazy, but we know crazy. Let's just get inside, and regroup.' Steve mumbled, staggering to his feet. Dustin and El set off and Steve shooed the spirit-blessed girl on ahead with a jerk of his head to

Robin.

Robin didn't move. She watched as the Spirit turned away and yanked his dao out of the creature's corpse. It smelt strongly like rot, and the blades were covered in grey gunk. He couldn't help but make a grunt of disgust.

His head spun, and he was so thirsty. He was also feeling a little pissed off that this Robin seemed to think he had some ulterior motive than just surviving when he'd just saved all of their lives.

But he was a firebender, and if they were actually Water Tribe, then no doubt he wasn't welcome with them.

Although, they seemed confused or surprised at what he'd done; maybe they'd never seen lightning bending before. It wasn't unlikely, especially considering how far away from the war this place seemed, and how few people could handle lightning.

*I didn't even know that I could handle lightning. Not for sure.*

His throat hurt. He thought longingly of the tea shop, and Uncle's new signature green tea, how welcome that would be right now. He wondered what Uncle would have thought of his display.

*'Reckless!' or 'once out of possibilities, one is left with only impossibilities and what one does with those is only a show of one's own will'*

*or maybe 'I'm proud of you.'*

*Ugh. Let me just vomit real quick.*

And then he bent over and gagged at the floor, woozy. Nothing came out because he hadn't eaten for almost forty-eight hours. Robin gasped and took a step back, before realising he was only retching. He fell to the floor, thigh weak.

'Can't say I've seen a more appropriate response to one of those creatures. Seriously they smell like actual garbage. And not normal garbage, more like the liquid that collects at the bottom of the food bin after a week or so...' Robin took a step towards him, but he scooted backwards, hands on his dao, still retching. She halted and nervously put her hands up.

'Sorry, I... '

The Blue Spirit got back to his feet unsteadily. Steve looked pale himself, and Robin glanced back and forth between them before choosing to duck under Steve's arm and start towards the faint glow of the Spirit Pool.

The Blue Spirit wondered if he should follow, or if that was one of the slightly worse ideas he'd ever had.

'Wait. Dude,' Steve stopped Robin and turned around slowly. 'We came out here to find you. I know you're injured and it's not safe out

here.

Please, we owe you a lot. Let us help. I won't even hit you with my bat this time.'

He gave a lopsided grin, but the Spirit didn't smile. Well, technically he is always smiling.

*This is too good to be true.*

Steve looked at Robin beseechingly, who rolled her eyes, before turning to the Spirit. 'We do owe you. Although you owe us too. If we hadn't come to find you, you'd be just more dirt on the forest floor right now.'

It was true and also false. The creature wouldn't have heard him, it had followed everyone else's voices. Probably.

They didn't have to do much convincing though. What other option did he have? It was this or die from his injuries on the walk back to Ba Sing Se.

He nodded sharply and followed behind with a limp, gritting his teeth against the pain through his whole body at this point.

Reaching the edge of the treeline felt like gulping a calming tea.

His arm ached from the shoulder wound and as he followed them round the pool, he felt his leg wobble underneath him, having to

grasp the wooden fence to keep from dropping.

Steve saw the Spirit hanging back and broke off from Robin, who tried to grab his sleeve, but he danced out of the way and pulled a face at her.

Steve walked up to the Spirit, biting his lip, eyebrows low.

He was just trying to catch his breath, there was no need to look so *concerned* . He could manage a small walk.

‘You okay?’ Steve reached for his shoulder to help him along, but he flinched back.

Steve looked immediately embarrassed and shuffled his feet. Annoyed, the Spirit crossed his arms and leaned back against the fence.

‘Sorry. Come inside and we’ll have that looked at. You’ve been through the wars haven’t you? I tell you, I’ve had an injury or two myself, and it never gets any easier really. People who say it does are lying.’ Steve gestured but didn’t come close.

The Spirit thought about taking off his mask. The Spirit didn’t. He breathed, and winced at the hot blood running down his leg.

‘But you’re in luck! I have a medkit around here somewhere, and I’ve



got experience with it. Do you mind if we get some other people along? No one from the lab, I promise, just people who can help.

I can usually sleep off a concussion, but your leg wound looks bad. It might need more than my feeble medic skills, honestly.'

Steve's babbling was kind of comforting, a counteractive measure to the Blue Spirit's silence.

'You are not *sleeping off* a concussion, Steve-' Robin grumbled from the doorway, keeping a close eye on the man.

'And I have some food too, I can cook us up whatever you want; I bet you're hungry.' Steve made puppy dog eyes.

At that, his stomach rumbled, and he let go of the fence. Steve gave a triumphant grin, like he was some kind of toddler he'd convinced not to cry.

He'd show him yet.

They reached the door, Steve walking backwards, Robin just inside, watching Steve like a goalkeeper waiting for the ball.

'Just come on in, this way. Don't stress about it. Robin, I'm fine, just a bit queasy.'

'Just a bit queasy is not *fine* , Steve.'

‘Meh, on a concussion scale 1 to 10, this is barely a 4.’

‘Your *head* is *bleeding* .’

‘Head wounds bleed a lot! That's what they *do* .’

The inside of the house was *odd* . Items were strewn about that he didn't recognise but must have some function. There was a bookcase right beside the door, but as he yanked a book out, he saw it used characters that he'd never seen before. Something deeply weird was going on here.

‘Those are my parents' books. Super boring.’

The Spirit looked up at Steve, and he seemed to have a pinched look, like he didn't want the Spirit to be messing with them. The Spirit backed away but Steve just gave a big smile and spun away.

‘Have you ever been in a house this big? Sometimes even I get lost in here. No one's ever really home but me or my friends so...you can stay here however long you want to.’

The front hall was indeed big, with several doors. The architecture was beyond bizarre and didn't look like any Nation's handiwork that he'd ever encountered before. The ceiling swooped like the palace, but the wallpaper was made of an odd material, and he could feel lightning *everywhere* .

It smelled like vanilla tea and oak wood, although it was only a bit warmer inside than out.

Everything was generally rectangular and large here, the windows filled with a transparent material to keep out the wind instead of using shutters.

They *had* to be waterbenders, right?

He stopped to examine the material, which was cold and hard, but smooth, brittle. Easily breakable. It almost reminded him of someone, but she hadn't been breakable since Mum left. He could see her snapping in her anger though, all glittering sharp shards.

*Azula would love that idea. I'll have to steal some for her.*

The Spirit realised it was silent other than the faint chatter of Robin and the children from an adjoining room. Steve was still standing nearby, watching him warily, as if he could read his mind. He snapped his head round to glare, and Steve's shoulders flinched, jaw dropping slightly as he jumped. If he smirked, it was between him and his mask.

‘Uh, look, man, you should take off that mask.’

The Spirit turned back around to stare at his fingers on the cold-hard-brittle, letting the urge to push settle in around him and fade.

‘There's some other people coming and I'm sure you don't want their first impression of you to be so... *scary* .’

He bristled at the man's tone and Steve let out a nervous laugh. ‘Obviously, you don't have to right *now* ... we need to get your injuries sorted out anyway.’

Yes.

But he reached up with numb fingers, and undid the ribbon from the back of his head. His heart thumped, an awkwardly physical sensation. He kept his face turned away. Then the mask was in his hands, looking small and insignificant.

He felt an insane urge to spook the guy again, but just with his normal face, because it would be *funny* . He didn't have *that* low self-esteem though, so instead he turned slowly, right unscarred side first, until he was fully facing the other man. Steve's eyes widened, and his eyes darted away in shock, maybe, before looking him in the eyes again. Steve opened his mouth to say something, but Zuko knew the spokes upon which he'd place his string and was uninterested in hearing it.

‘Take me to the waterbender.’

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Shorter chapter this time. I was on the fence about whether or not to get him to take his mask off, but considering the plot I have lined out, it would just be a pain to keep him silent and spooky the whole time. Now he's just shouty and spooky!